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Committee on Homeland Security passes comprehensive, bipartisan Katrina “Lessons Learned” Legislation *Bill praised, endorsed by First Responders nationwide*

Washington, D.C. (Wednesday, May 17, 2006)—Today, the Committee on Homeland Security, led by Chairman Peter T. King (R-NY), unanimously adopted comprehensive Katrina “Lessons Learned” legislation that will take steps to strengthen disaster preparedness and response capabilities nationwide; improve communication and coordination at the federal, state, and local levels; strengthen the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) within the Department of Homeland Security (DHS); and eliminate waste, fraud, and abuse. The bill, H.R. 5351, entitled the “National Emergency Management Reform and Enhancement Act of 2006,” was written by Reps. Dave Reichert (R-WA) and Michael McCaul (R-TX).

This comprehensive legislation has received the endorsement of first responder organizations nationwide, including the International Association of Firefighters, the International Brotherhood of Police Officers, and the American Ambulance Association.

“Since Hurricanes Katrina and Rita struck last year, Members of our Committee have met repeatedly with the local and state-level first responders and emergency coordinators, people who were on the ground and understand where our response fell short and what needs to be done to correct it,” King said. “And I’m proud to say that their input—and the suggestions of first responders like them all across the country—played a major role in the substance of this legislation.”

“As someone who has spent more than 30 years as a first responder, I know that the success of disaster response hinges on how well it is executed at the local level,” Reichert said. “Emergency management at the federal level will be greatly enhanced by adopting a bottom-up strategy that helps local governments be more effective. Our legislation emphasizes the need to plan, train, and exercise in a coordinated manner with State, local, and tribal governments. By doing so, we will truly establish a national emergency management system.”

“I witnessed first-hand the devastation that a Katrina or Rita-strength hurricane can cause and I understand the great importance of ensuring an effective federal response; and this is exactly what this legislation will do,” McCaul said. “This vital legislation puts FEMA on the ground where the crisis is occurring instead of the agency trying to manage the catastrophe

from Washington; and with the fraud prevention measures included in this legislation, Americans impacted by a Katrina-like event won't become victims of crimes on top of being victims of mother nature or a man-made crisis. We've learned from our mistakes in the past, and this legislation will help make sure those mistakes are not repeated.”

The Members explained that the legislation would:

Strengthen FEMA and Improve Preparedness and Response Measures Nationwide

- Elevates and strengthens FEMA within DHS, making a number of important preparedness, response, and emergency communications to the agency
- Mandates that the head of FEMA be an experienced and well-qualified emergency and disaster response manager
- Elevates the head of FEMA to an Under Secretary, who will serve as the President’s principal advisor on emergency management and report directly to the President in times of national emergency and crises;
- Consolidates DHS’ Directorate of Preparedness within FEMA, to increase coordination between FEMA and local first responders;
- Mandates better DHS oversight of administered federal benefits, and establishes proper internal management controls to prevent and detect waste, fraud, and abuse; and
- Requires DHS to develop national standards for first responder training and a comprehensive, uniform program for the training of homeland security personnel and first responders at all levels of government.

Streamline Coordination and Communication at the Federal, State, and Local Levels

- Establishes two Deputy Under Secretary positions - one for Emergency Preparedness and Mitigation and one for Emergency Response and Recovery - both of whom will be well-qualified and report directly to the Under Secretary, to increase coordination between FEMA and local first responders;
- Establishes DHS Regional Offices and Regional Directors to work in partnership with state and local governments, and emergency response and support providers, to ensure coordination and integration of regional preparedness and response activities;
- Grants the Regional Director, in a time of crisis, the ability to coordinate and direct the federal response within the operational area, and make operational decisions without having to obtain approval from headquarters, vastly improving response time; and
- Creates an Assistant Secretary for Emergency Communications, who will be responsible for helping establish and maintain interoperable communications capabilities at all levels of government, ensuring first responders on the ground can communicate with one another.

“For our Committee, this isn’t a jurisdictional fight or a power grab; it’s about passing the right legislation that will implement the best possible reforms to protect the American people,” King said. “DHS, as well as our first responders at the state and local levels, must be equipped with the proper resources, communications, and leadership to handle a worst case scenario and provide a rapid, coordinated, and effective response. That is exactly what this legislation will accomplish.”